



“Sleepiness as a key figure to contradict light as a symbol of rebirth” in Efua Sutherland’s Foriwa

Alexandre Nubukpo

alexandre25nubukpo@gmail.com

Université de Lomé, Togo.

Abstract - Something that is commonly taken for granted is that the foreigner is not the one who is seen as a native born in a given locality. The foreigner is the one that was not born in that specific locality or who's perceived as a foreigner because his or her parents are from another locality altogether. From there we can reach the common migrant who may be seen as someone from another state or another country. The foreigner maybe made foreigner by the color of his skin whether White or Black or else. Labaran is a foreigner in the play *Foriwa*. How can one be a foreigner in his own country? By the very fact that you are not from the tribe, the village or the city. Chance had Labaran feeling different in his community of birth. He migrated within the limits set by a country of birth. Migration as a quest! Migration made to mean something postcolonial as well as chauvinistic. No love story could have been considered possible when self-respecting Labaran met the not in Kyerefaso working nor in Kyerefaso residing queen's daughter. Nevertheless, their will to walk hands in hands as friends made light possible again and, utter sleepiness in the welcoming community something that could be confronted!

Keywords: color – foreigner – locality – migration – postcolonial – sleepiness

Résumé - Partant du principe que la figure de l'étranger est d'abord une figure locale. L'étranger est celui qui n'est pas né dans la localité ou celui qui bien que né dans la localité a des parents qui viennent d'une autre localité. De ce principe on peut aboutir à l'immigré qui est quelqu'un qui vient d'un autre pays. La figure de l'étranger peut être aussi celle 'une couleur de peau noire en opposition par exemple à la blanche. La singularité de Labaran est à la source de son désir de migration. Le mouvement migratoire de Labaran de son lieu de naissance vers Kyerefaso est ici vécu comme quête d'une forme d'absolu aux relents quelque peu postcoloniaux et patriotiques. La possibilité d'une relation entre Labaran et Foriwa, une relation quelque peu ambiguë mais une relation pudique et amicale qui peut toutefois déboucher sur une histoire d'amour, semble donner à voir un tunnel qui s'illumine et on entraperçoit, quoique symboliquement, des sorties possibles à l'endormissement de Kyerefaso.

Mots-clés : couleur - endormissement - étranger - localité - migration - postcoloniaux -

INTRODUCTION

It is not easy for someone who doesn't belong to a certain historical period of West Africa, where things were still undecided of and where the late fifties and the early sixties brought a hope of building as Africans something common which they don't owe to the colonizer. So the colonizer having left what was



expected from those who embodied the hope of millions was to build something in which people could recognize themselves and be proud. The end result was a failure mainly. So the former colonizer came as new advisers for leaders who forgot what was primarily expected from them. To a certain extent things went tribal. That is the reason why building the character of Labaran confronts tribalism as well as the role of adviser that the former colonizer won back. But in Efua Sutherland's play *Foriwa*, the end result is not known at the end of the play. Tribalism is not evicted for certain and Labaran has not yet proved himself so good an adviser that the former colonizer is sure to be disqualified as a possible adviser for the ruler. In the play *Foriwa*, *Foriwa* is a princess supposed to take the crown after Queen mother. And Labaran, the foreigner from within is the best adviser that there could have been and that there was for princess *Foriwa*'s Kyerefaso short term future.

One can hardly consider studying the Efua Sutherland's play *Foriwa* without thinking about her family background, thinking about her Ghanaian roots. Efua Theodora, a woman who got married to an African American of the name of Sutherland. The play under study could have been *Edufa*, and it would have given to read and hear sounds echoing Euripides *Aceltis*! It is *Foriwa* instead, the play that forces us into questioning the symbol of light! How does one emancipate oneself from the feeling of abandonment? A feeling that gives birth to sleepiness! The play had its source in a short story. With a background of a newly independent third world country in the twentieth century, a community living in an underdeveloped setting, a city as well as a kingdom at once. Two self-respecting and educated persons, an almost rural royalty and a migrant coming from a tribe different from that of the inhabitants of Kyerefaso, met! Labaran was a migrant, who though integrated was still seen and lived with as a foreigner by the inhabitants of Kyerefaso. These two people, Labaran and *Foriwa*, felt attracted to one another and developed a friendship that transcended tribal migration! Migration in itself having its own contradictions and always staying a difficult issue! Womanhood and leadership in a patriarchal world subjected to customs, beliefs and tradition. A world in which, suspicion is real and could be intoxicating when the relevancy of a woman and her position are being questioned day in and day out.

Labaran as an integrated foreigner is going to be the key figure of a promise of rebirth. The light is weak but true! The symbol of sleepiness is nothing but the putting into picture of an almost everlasting status quo that the community made peace with or had to convince itself of having to make peace with though fed up with it. Moreover, it is the peace making with it that seems to create the night, the lack of light, the sleepiness. To project any awakening is simply not the



agenda. And the making of a tradition of sleepiness becomes a promise fulfilled. Just like all other traditions it fails not to go with a certain degree of conservatism.

The playwright Efua Sutherland is seen as one of the pioneer of Ghanaian theatre. The woman who is considered to have invented the “Anansegoro,” she is. Her play *Edufa* is generally seen as the myth of Alcestis revisited. *Edufa* was published in 1967. Five years earlier, she published *Foriwa!* That play itself could easily be associated with a short story the author wrote a decade earlier: “New life in Kyerefaso.” In the short story, the young lady’s name was Foruwa and Foruwa in the short story felt attracted to a foreigner who took on himself the responsibility to awaken Kyerefaso. There was already in the short story a queen mother, mother to Foruwa. That unnamed foreigner in the short story became ten years later Labaran in the play *Foriwa*. In the short story, the foreigner was a weaver of baskets and of fabrics. Weaving as a fictional component of the Kyerefaso story, making sense in the short story, weaving disappeared altogether from the play *Foriwa*. It would have been of some help if one knew beforehand that the author was an orphan who was educated by her grandmother, a woman whose main activity is believed to have been weaving. The playwright Harriet Efua Maria Parker is said to have been born of a royal lineage on her mother’s side and specifically the Gomua Brofo and the Anomabu families. She got married to an African American. That man’s name turned out to be Sutherland. That is where the Efua Sutherland came from. It has to be said that weaving baskets or weaving fabrics generally called *Kente* was and still is nothing uncommon in the coastal line when you are from West Africa or specifically from a neighboring country of Ghana. It is not something specifically Ghanaian.

If one has to stick to a tradition of classic play writing, provided one defines what one means by classic, the play to consider would have been *Edufa* in that there is nothing new in having a wife dying or sacrificing herself to save the life of a husband. It is not new. It is equally easy to suspect a desire to write about oneself and one family. It can be a desire to write about one’s royal ascendancy when you consider *Foriwa*, a play with a queen mother as a character and the other main character being a princess by the name of Foriwa. Foriwa embodies a woman who, among other things, was humble and used to teach in the capital city of her country. The name of the country Foriwa and Labaran are from is not given. It was certainly not Kyerefaso, where only Foriwa is from and not Labaran. Kyerefaso is where Foriwa is a princess. It has to be said that these authors of the 1960s did represent a certain Africa, a certain idea of what the promises of newly independent countries were then, and what these countries made of themselves sixty years or more after having obtained their independence from a so-called colonizer that was impeding on local people’s rights. Some playwrights did write in their native vernaculars then. N’gugi Wa Thiong’o for example. Writing in



one's own vernacular meant that language being an evidence of a surrender of one's freedom could no longer make sense. Politically, it was no longer true. Sticking to writing in English meant a lot, and even more so when one chooses to use European myths like Alcestis in a play like *Edufa*. The play's title should have been *Ampoma*. Ampoma is the lady who owed her death to the evil spiritual practices of her husband Edufa, so that Edufa who should have died may continue to live. Ampoma, as a character, is a kind of character of Alcestis revisited. That wouldn't have been a problem not to compare *Edufa*, the play with *Alcestis*, the play, if the African playwright had never gotten in touch with western literature and if the play *Edufa* had been written in vernacular. "This is the day when Edufa should have died. Another has died for him. His wife, Ampoma. She loved him and she has died to spare his life [...] Coward! Coward! Coward! he is a cursed man. Go tell the town about the man who let his wife die for him.¹" Of course, in the Euripides's *Alcestis*, there was a fight in the realm of the dead to bring Alcestis back to the living back to her husband. In the African context, a context in which people search recognition intellectually, it is far more difficult to confront the very fact of writing about the dead, having the dead fight one against the other, and bring back people from the dead. The playwright would have been addressed as a sorceress and would have paid for the consequences of what was read as sorcery. The level of primitivism that could be rightly associated, indirectly or directly, to Christianity itself in Africa can be and at times is quite high. People are irresponsible in the name of Jesus Christ and without being able to bring any evidence of sorcery, people half-educated, and a large majority of them denies any intellectual quest to the African intellectual himself that is not borrowed or copied from the western world. Therefore, part of who one is, is necessarily defined by people's fear and people's prejudices. And these are your contemporary fellow men and women. They will not be honest enough to accept their limits generally due to the fact of being insufficiently educated. On top of it, people do complain about colonization! In such a context, even the playwright could not have had a character more sophisticated than Ampoma was, if we were to stick to Efua Sutherland's *Edufa*. This, simply because the playwright would not have wanted her name and her reputation tarnished by her own community. So she could have had the intellectual means but not be brave enough to confront her readership. In other words, part of her society. This leads people to diminish the intensity of what they produce intellectually. They think about the aftermaths.

The symbol of light is written using the lack of light as evidence of being sleepy. The desire to show a kind of gratitude to a society that welcomed and integrated you is a legitimate desire in a migrant. And Labaran, though a mere character in

¹ Sutherland, Efua, T., *Edufa*, Longman African Classic, 1987, p. 57.



a play, is a migrant. Can one be a migrant in one's own country of birth? Should people sharing the same citizenship feel foreigners towards the others? It was not as if anyone had ever abandoned the city state of Kyerefaso. Nevertheless, there was a feeling so strong that the reality of being abandoned could no longer be contradicted. The feeling of abandonment nourishing the powerlessness in face of the needed ability to giving birth to oneself again!

CONCLUSION

Things may be said to evolve with time. Foriwa, the character in the play, did not want to indulge in anything that would mean forsaking one's future or the light in one's eyes for a man. But towards the end of the play, it is Foriwa that reassures Labaran that there was nothing to be afraid of whether people gossip or try to see in him a foreigner. As for her, she will walk hand in hand with Labaran till the end of the road. And Labaran did win the trust of Foriwa that he did not even know about when he had two young men of Kyerefaso go get some training so as to make something of their lives. Two young men, who came back trained and ready to work for Kyerefaso. Labaran was still a commoner that just helped without expecting anything in return. And Labaran never forgot that he did not belong. And He is told he is no foreigner in Kyerefaso. Such an attitude could be understood as acceptance and integration. He was not looking for power. He just did what he thought was the right thing to do. He just kept a positive state of mind. That won him the affection of Foriwa, who did resign from her job in the capital city to stay at Kyerefaso. There was work to do in Kyerefaso. And with Labaran, she thought it could be done. The enthusiasm of Labaran brought light. The discouragement of the two young men who without Labaran insisting would not have gotten a specific training and come back may have been the symbols of some sort of sleepiness.

Bibliography

- Anyidoho, Kofi, "Auntie Efua, We cannot forget," *African Quarterly on the Arts*, Vol 1, N°3, Michigan State University, pp. 5-7.
- Conradie, P.J., "The Myth of Alcestis and its treatment by Efua Sutherland in her play *Edufa*," *Akroterion* 42 (1997), University of Stellenbosch, pp.75-84.
- Derrida, Jacques, *Le Monolinguisme de L'Autre*, Editions Galilée, Paris, 1996.
- Euripides, *Ten Plays by Euripides*, translated by Moses Hadas, John Mc Lean, Bantam Classic Edition, 1936, 1981.
- Gibbs, James, *Nkyin-Kyin, Essays on the Ghanaian Theatre*, Editions Rodopi, Amsterdam, New York, 2009.



Say, Shelter, "Theatre and Cultural Development; A focus on Efua T. Sutherland's *Edufa* and Zulu Sofola's *Wedlock of the Gods*," Theatre Arts Department, University of Ghana, Legon, July 2014.

Sutherland, Efua, "New Life in Kyerefaso," in *An African Treasury*, ed. Langston Hughes, Crown, New York, 1960, pp. 111-117.

Sutherland, Efua, *Foriwa*, Ghana Publishing Corporation, Tema, Ghana, 1967, 1971.

Sutherland, Efua, *Edufa*, Longman Group, UK. Limited. 1967, 1987.